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# Book Review: Fordham, A History of the Jesuit University of New York: 1841 – 2003

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## Book Review

### Fordham, A History of the Jesuit University of New York: 1841 – 2003 (2016)

Thomas J. Shelley  
New York: Fordham University Press  
536 pages; \$39.95 USD (Hardback)  
ISBN 978-08-2327-151-1  
<https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823271511.001.0001>

Reviewed by Michael T. Rizzi, Ed.D.

One of the best – and most underappreciated – genres in the field of higher education is the institutional history. Many colleges and universities publish books about themselves; often these books are written by members of the university's own faculty and are released in time to coincide with major anniversaries, like a sesquicentennial. Even more often, they are printed in elaborate coffee-table formats with glossy photography; some seem designed more to serve as attractive birthday gifts for alumni than as scholarly textbooks. Invariably, they find their way into the schools' admissions offices, presidents' desks, and the private libraries of major donors, where they are read casually and with a heavy dose of nostalgia.

Despite their consumerist design, many such books are also insightful and well-researched works of history by serious scholars. Anyone who overlooks their scholarly value because of their glossy packaging risks missing out on genuinely impressive research. Some good examples are Curran's (2010) three-volume *History of Georgetown University* and Rishel's (1997) *The Spirit that Gives Life: The History of Duquesne University*, both of which deserve to be read well beyond their own campus communities. Enthusiasts of the genre might also stock their shelves with Kuzniewski's (1999) work on Holy Cross and Contosta's (1995) work on Villanova.

We can now add to this list Msgr. Thomas J. Shelley's outstanding history of Fordham University. A Fordham alumnus, former faculty member, and priest of the Archdiocese of New York, Shelley is typical of the kinds of authors usually commissioned to write such histories. At over 500 pages (including 16 pages of full-color photographs) it is handsome enough to look

good on the shelves or coffee tables of Fordham alumni – but it would be a shame if that is where it stayed.

Anyone who approaches Shelley's book expecting a simple history of New York's Jesuit university will be pleasantly surprised to find a much broader narrative that incorporates the early development of American Catholicism. More than a fifth of the book is devoted to Fordham's complex origin story, which begins in 1841 when Bishop (later Archbishop) John Hughes established St. John's College in the then-rural Bronx. After limping along for five years under diocesan control, the College was entrusted to the Jesuits. A small band of French Jesuits, who had been staffing the now-defunct St. Mary's College in the frontier Diocese of Bardstown, Kentucky, abandoned that ministry and relocated themselves, their library, and their lab equipment from Kentucky to New York in 1846.

Shelley tells this fascinating story in great detail, and in doing so, introduces readers to some important themes in the early history of the American Church: the migration of old Maryland Catholics west to Kentucky; the brief period when tiny Bardstown seemed poised to become the center of frontier Catholicism; the struggles of European Jesuit authorities to staff their American missions; and the challenges faced by nineteenth-century dioceses like Baltimore, New York, and New Orleans as they sought to serve (and educate) rapidly growing immigrant communities.

Shelley takes the reader on an interesting contextual journey that follows Fordham's growth through New York City's industrial age, as urbanization encroached upon the idyllic campus and as the character of New York Catholicism evolved from one of overwhelmingly Irish stock to a diverse Irish/Italian/polyglot mixture. The blight, decay, and gradual gentrification of the Bronx; the transformational effects of Vatican II; and the challenge of maintaining Fordham's Catholic identity as lay faculty came to outnumber Jesuits and government regulation crept in – all of these themes are presented with skill and clarity.

In addition to situating Fordham in this broad context, Shelley also tells fascinating micro-stories about the inner workings of the Society of Jesus and the contentiousness of New York politics. Particularly interesting is his description of the early twentieth century – when east-coast Jesuits were still debating whether Georgetown or Fordham should become their flagship research university – and the devastating effects of Fordham's brief loss of accreditation in 1935 that decided the matter in favor of Georgetown

(Curran, 2010). Also interesting is Shelley's discussion of the wheeler-dealer politics, backroom deals, lawsuits, and other typical New York practices that surrounded Fordham's acquisition of premier Manhattan real estate for its Lincoln Center campus (established 1960).

The book's first nine chapters are essentially linear history, telling Fordham's chronological story from its origins until the early 1900s, when it emerged as a complex university with multiple schools and campuses. Then, Shelley wisely takes a four-chapter interlude to focus individually on most of Fordham's graduate and professional schools: Law, Social Service, Business, Education, and Arts & Sciences, along with now-defunct schools of Medicine, Pharmacy, and (intriguingly enough) Irish Studies. The history of each of these schools is told from beginning to end, which provides a tighter narrative and is preferable to covering the whole university decade-by-decade. Unfortunately, as a side effect of this strategy, it becomes necessary for Shelley to reference the same events and same people over and over in the context of each school – sometimes repeating himself, and sometimes referring passively to major historical events that will not be properly introduced until a few chapters later. Phrases like, “as has already been mentioned,” or “as previously noted,” are common in these chapters. To those who leaf through the book piecemeal, this can be helpful, but to anyone reading the book in its entirety, this can become tedious. The final eight chapters return to a mostly linear history that covers the period from World War II to the present.

Even at 500 pages, no book can hope to do justice to every aspect of a university as complex as Fordham, and some omissions are inevitable. However, a few of Shelley's omissions are surprising. The school's decision to change its name from St. John's College to Fordham University in 1907 is presented matter-of-factly without much discussion of the deliberations involved. Fordham's athletic programs get surprisingly scant attention (half of one chapter). Also missing is any mention of how Fordham chose maroon as its official color or the ram as its mascot; such tidbits are trivial compared to the broad sociocultural history that Shelley obviously set out to write, but these quirky details are often the things that give character to universities and contribute to their charm. And considering the number of notable New Yorkers connected to Fordham over the years, it is surprising that famous alumni like Vince Lombardi and faculty like Margaret Mead escape with barely a mention.

Nonetheless, Shelley succeeds in giving one of America's great Catholic universities a history worthy of its high stature. Hopefully, the book's audi-

ence will extend far beyond the Bronx and Lincoln Center and find its way onto the shelves of anyone interested in American Catholic higher education, especially as it took shape in America's largest and most economically important city.

As Shelley notes in the book's preface, "In 1941... (Fordham president) Father Robert I Gannon, S.J., predicted that in the future only two classes of universities would continue to survive in the United States, those that were 'very rich' and those that were 'indispensable'" (ix). Those comments have proven all-too-prescient, as many small, regional Catholic colleges (most recently, St. Gregory's University in Oklahoma and Marylhurst University in Oregon) have permanently shuttered their doors. Fordham's story is a typical Catholic university story, characterized by a constant struggle to improve both its finances and its profile while staying true to its religious roots and educating the neediest members of its community. Not all Catholic universities have survived these pressures, but those that have, including Fordham, have a very important story to tell.

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